

The New York Times

Clinton's Remark on Ruling Irks Gay Rights Advocates

Saturday, 8 July 2006

By PATRICK HEALY

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton sidestepped the controversy over gay marriage in New York yesterday, reiterating her support for gay civil unions and calling for "full equality for people in committed relationships" after the state's highest court rejected marriage rights for same-sex couples.

Mrs. Clinton's remarks, which made no specific mention of gay marriage, disappointed and even angered some gay rights advocates, who are now recruiting political leaders to push a gay marriage bill through the State Legislature.

The New York Court of Appeals ruled on Thursday that lawmakers, not the courts, were the proper authority to consider the issue.

Some advocates said privately that they were particularly annoyed by Mrs. Clinton's use of the phrase "full equality," given that it echoes the phrase "marriage equality," which gay groups use to describe gay marriage.

These advocates contended that Mrs. Clinton was winking meaninglessly at gay voters, suggesting that she was supporting their agenda even though she would not take a public stand on a divisive issue like gay marriage.

Mrs. Clinton, who is running for re-election this year, reacted to the court ruling in a statement; she was traveling on the West Coast yesterday, and at one point ignored shouted questions from reporters about the decision.

"Senator Clinton supports full equality for people in committed relationships, including health insurance, life insurance and pensions, and hospital visitation and believes we have to keep working to reach those goals," said Jennifer Hanley, a spokeswoman for Mrs. Clinton.

Asked if Mrs. Clinton's support for "full equality" was tantamount to supporting gay marriage, Ms. Hanley said the senator supported civil unions, a legal arrangement that includes the civil benefits of marriage but does not disturb tradition.

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said Mrs. Clinton's position was at odds with the personal wishes of many gay New Yorkers.

"All of these rights are important, but full equality means marriage equality, period," Mr. Foreman said.

Alan Van Capelle, a gay rights leader in New York who has criticized Mrs. Clinton's position in the past, sought to isolate her from other prominent Democrats in New York who support gay marriage.

"I am glad Senator Clinton supports specific benefits for people in committed relationships, and one day I hope she will stand with Eliot Spitzer, Alan Hevesi, Dennis Rivera and hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers who are working to make sure gay and lesbian people have the freedom to marry," said Mr. Van Capelle, who is executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda.

New York's senior senator, Charles E. Schumer, also said yesterday that he supported civil unions and that the Legislature, not the Court of Appeals, should decide any policy on gay marriage.

His view drew criticism from the gay rights advocates along the same lines that Mrs. Clinton faced, but it was less fierce.

Because she is widely viewed as a possible Democratic candidate for the White House in 2008, Mrs. Clinton's view on gay marriage has national implications, advocates said. And some of them are still irritated that her husband, former President Bill Clinton, signed a bill in office banning federal recognition of gay marriage, and suggested that gay marriage was an issue that contributed to the defeat of John Kerry, the Democratic presidential nominee in 2004.